

KAISER WILHELM ON "BABEL AND BIBLE."¹

(A Letter from His Majesty Emperor William II. to Admiral Hollman, President of the Oriental Society.)

February 15, 1903.

My Dear Hollman:

My telegram to you will unquestionably have removed the doubts which you still entertained regarding the concluding passage of the lecture, which was clearly understood by the audience and therefore could not be altered. I am glad, nevertheless, that the subject-matter of the second lecture has again been taken up, and I gladly seize the opportunity after a perusal of a copy of the proofs to state again clearly my position with regard to it.

During an evening's entertainment with us Professor Delitzsch had the opportunity to fully confer and debate with Her Majesty, the Empress, and Dr. Dryander, while I listened and remained passive. Unfortunately he abandoned the standpoints of the strict historian and Assyriologist, going into religious and theological conclusions which were quite nebulous or bold.

When he came to speak of the New Testament, it became clear at once that he developed such quite divergent views regarding the person of our Saviour that I had to express the diametrically opposite view. He does not recognise the divinity of Christ as a deduction therefrom and asserts that the Old Testament contains no revelation about him as the Messiah.

Here the Assyriologist and the historical investigator ceases and the theologian begins, with all his light and shadow sides. In this province I can only urgently advise him to proceed cautiously, step by step, and at any rate to ventilate his theses only in the theological books and in the circle of his colleagues. Spare us,

¹ We published in the March number of *The Open Court* extracts from the Emperor's letter, such as then appeared in the daily press. In the meantime the entire document in its original form has become accessible to us, and considering its importance, we here republish the whole in English translation.—*Ed.*

the laymen, and, above all, the Oriental Society, from hearing of them.

We carry on excavations and publish the results in behalf of science and history, but not to conform or attack religious hypotheses.

Professor Delitzsch, the theologian, has run away with Professor Delitzsch, the historian; his history is exploited merely for the benefit of his theology.

I regret that Professor Delitzsch did not adhere to his original program which he developed last year; viz., to determine, on the basis of the discoveries of our society and by means of critically verified translations of the inscriptions, the extent to which these materials shed light on the history of the people of Israel or elucidate the historical events, customs and habits, traditions, politics and laws of the Israelites. In other words, he should have shown the mutual relationship in which the undeniably powerful and highly developed civilisation of the Babylonians stood to that of the Israelites, and the extent to which the former might have influenced the latter or have impressed upon it its own stamp. He could thus have saved, so to speak, from a purely human point of view, the honor and good name of the Babylonian people which has certainly been depicted in the Old Testament in a revolting and grossly one-sided manner. This was indeed his original intention,—at least as I conceive it,—and certainly his is a most fruitful and interesting field, the investigation, elucidation, and explanation of which necessarily interests us laymen in the highest degree and would have placed us under the highest obligation to him. At precisely here is the place where he should have stopped but beyond which unfortunately his ardent zeal led him. As was not otherwise to be expected, the excavations brought information to light which has a bearing also on the religion of the Old Testament. He should have mentioned this fact and should have emphasised and explained whatever coincidences occurred; but all purely religious conclusions it was his duty to have left for his hearers themselves to draw. Thus the interest and the favor of the lay public would have been gained in the fullest measure for his lecture.

He approached the question of revelation in a polemical tone, more or less denying it or reducing it to a matter of purely human development. That was a grave error, for thereby he touched on the innermost, holiest possession of many of his hearers.

And whether he did so justifiably or unjustifiably,—and that is

for our present purpose quite indifferent, since we are concerned here not with scientific conventions of theologians but with lay people of all ages and professions,—he still either demolished or endangered the dearest conceptions, or it may be, the illusions of many of his hearers,—conceptions with which these people had interwoven their oldest and dearest associations. And unquestionably he shattered or at least undermined for these people their faith. It is a deed that only the greatest genius should venture to attempt and for which the mere study of Assyriology did not justify him.

Goethe also once discussed this question, calling emphatic attention to the fact that one must be on one's guard in speaking to the general public not to destroy even such insignificant structures as mere "pagodas of terminology." The fundamental principle, that it is very important to distinguish precisely between what is and what is not adapted to the place, the public, etc., appears to have escaped the excellent Professor in his zeal. As a professional theologian it is permissible for him to publish in technical reviews and for his colleagues theses, hypotheses, and theories, nay, even convictions which it would not be proper for him to utter in a public lecture or book.

I should now like to advert again to my personal attitude toward the doctrine of revelation and to state it in terms similar to those I have formerly employed toward you, my dear Hollman, and toward other gentlemen.

I distinguish between two different kinds of revelation,—one progressive, and, as it were, historical; the other purely religious, as preparing the way for the future Messiah.

Regarding the former, it must be said for me, it does not admit of a doubt, not even the slightest, that God reveals himself continuously in the race of man created by him. He breathed into man the breath of his life and follows with fatherly love and interest the development of the human race. In order to lead it forward and develop it, he reveals himself in this or that great sage, whether priest or king, whether among the heathen, the Jews, or the Christians. Hammurabi was one. So was Moses, Abraham, Homer, Charlemagne, Luther, Shakespeare, Goethe, Kant, and Emperor William the Great. These he sought out and endowed with his grace to accomplish splendid, imperishable results for their people, in their intellectual and physical provinces, according to his will. How often my grandfather pointed out that he was only an instrument in the Lord's hands.

The achievements of the great intellects of the world were do-

nated by God to the nations in order that they might through their aid make further progress, and might feel their way farther and farther through the labyrinths which yet remained uninvestigated. Unquestionably God did "reveal" himself differently to the different races according to their position and rank in the scale of civilisation, and he does the same to-day. For just as we may be overwhelmed by the grandeur, magnificence, and might of nature when we look upon it and wonder while so doing at the grandeur of God who is revealed in it, so assuredly are we justified, when we contemplate the grand and splendid deeds that a man or a nation has accomplished, in wondering with gratitude at the splendor of the revelation made by God in them. He works directly upon us and among us.

The second form of revelation, the more religious, is that which leads to the manifestation of our Lord. It was introduced with Abraham, slow but forward looking and omniscient, for humanity was lost without it. Now begins the most astonishing activity of God's revelation. Abraham's race and the peoples developing from it regard faith in one God as their holiest possession, and, it follows, hold fast to it with ironlike consistency. It is their duty to foster and cherish it. Split up during their Egyptian captivity, the divided elements were again welded together by Moses, ever trying to hold fast to their monotheism. It was the direct intervention of God that caused the rejuvenation of this people, thus proved through centuries, till the Messiah, heralded by prophets and psalmists, finally appeared, the greatest revelation of God in the world, for he appeared in the son himself. Christ is God, God in human form. He redeemed us and inspires, entices us to follow him. We feel his fire burning in us. His sympathy strengthens us. His discontent destroys us. But also his intercession saves us. Conscious of victory, building solely upon his world, we go through labor, ridicule, sorrow, misery, and death, for we have in him God's revealed word, and he never lies.

• That is my view of these matters.

For us of the Evangelical Denomination the Word has, through Luther, been made our all, and as a good theologian Delitzsch should not have forgotten that our great Luther taught us to sing and believe :

" Inviolable the Word let stand."

It is to me self-evident that the Old Testament contains many sections which are of a purely human and historical nature, and are not God's revealed word. These are merely historical descriptions

of incidents of all kinds which happen in the political, religious, moral, and intellectual life of this people.

The legislative act on Sinai, for example, can be only regarded as symbolically inspired by God. When Moses had to reburnish well known paragraphs of the law, perhaps derived from the code of Hammurabi, in order to incorporate and bind them into the loose, weak fabric of his people, here the historian can perhaps construe from the sense or wording a connection with the laws of Hammurabi, the friend of Abraham. That is perhaps logically correct. But that will never disguise the fact that God incited Moses thereto and in so far revealed himself to the people of Israel.

Accordingly it is my opinion, that henceforward in his lectures before our society it will be better for our good Professor to let matters of religion alone. On the other hand, he may depict undisturbed the relation which the religion, customs, etc. of the Babylonians bear to those of the Old Testament.

For me the following conclusions result from the foregoing discussions.

1. I believe in the one and only God.
2. We human beings need a form in order to teach his existence, especially for our children.
3. This has hitherto been the Old Testament. The present version of this will be possibly and substantially modified under the influence of research through inscriptions and excavations. That does not matter. Neither does it matter that much of the nimbus of the chosen people will thereby disappear. The kernel of the contents of the Old Testament will remain always the same,—God and his works.

Religion has never been the result of science, but the pouring out of the heart and being of man from intercourse with God.

With cordial thanks and greetings,

Your Faithful Friend,

WILHELM, I. R.

P. S.—You may make the utmost use of these lines. Let all who are interested read.